

PERROTIN

Paul PFEIFFER

Artnews,

*To See or Not to See: Learning from the Late Great Robert Irwin, Tourist Paintings, and What if
Chris Burden Had Gone to Therapy*

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Learning from the Late Robert Irwin and More – ARTnews.com

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Installation view of Robert Irwin's *untitled (dawn to dusk)*, 2016, at the Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas.
Photo Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images

Welcome to “To See or Not to See,” a recurring column covering a handful of exceptional Los Angeles gallery and museum exhibitions—the good, the bad, and the criminally overrated—in easily digestible, bite-size pieces.

“What is the nature of the game we’re in?” the late Robert Irwin asked me during an interview in 2016. So began his standard 90-minute art school lecture, recounted in a nondescript McDonald’s in San Diego. It was riveting, to be honest. In Irwin’s telling, the story of modern art was a radical, heroic event: “100 years of dismantling pictorial reality” during which Kazimir Malevich had achieved a new artistic ground zero. Recognizing “nothing they knew or loved,” friends of the late Suprematist called his floating squares a desert. Malevich however, freed from the burden of pictorial representation, looked at his own paintings and

saw what he described as “the supremacy of pure feeling.” “It’s not ‘I think therefore I am,’” Irwin said. “It’s ‘I feel, and therefore I think, and therefore I am.’ And that is the name of the game.”

Irwin, the pioneering Light and Space artist who died last October at the age of 95, had over the course of his decades-long career diligently unraveled the great mysteries of art. Yet there he was, having just finished a McMuffin, explaining it in the simplest terms. To me, his practice has always been a profoundly spiritual endeavor. In the 1960s, he had successively stripped his work of the conventions of art-making—he shed mark-making and the edges of the frame before abandoning his studio entirely—like a monastic journey of abandoning one’s material possessions. In his itinerant installations that sought communion with the elusive, ephemeral qualities of light, I saw the pious pursuit of the sublime. He minimized the imagery in his work to maximize its physicality, that ineffable feature that can’t be captured by photographs, but only felt in person. In that 90 minutes Irwin had imparted countless bits of wisdom, all of which boil down to the most uncomplicated rubric through which to view art: the simple desire to be moved.

“Art is about maximizing our understanding of feelings alongside thinking,” he said. “I feel, I think, therefore I am.” Irwin redefined my perception of the artist as the one who seeks art beyond the limits of that which we know and love, following their curiosity to its unknown ends. In this edition of “To See or Not to See,” that describes the way Paul Pfeiffer’s experiments in video show us the perversely religious subtext of our ordinary rituals of spectatorship. Or how Hugh Hayden imagines the queer future and comes to delightfully absurd conclusions. Taking us on her own journey of self-actualization, Barbara T. Smith embarked on a new art form called performance. So much of what artists do involves showing us the things we don’t see. “Part of my shtick,” Irwin often said, “is to make you aware of how fucking beautiful the world is.”

“Paul Pfeiffer: Prologue to the Story of the Birth of Freedom” at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA



Paul Pfeiffer, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (30), 2015.

Photo : ©Paul Pfeiffer/Courtesy the artist; Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; carlier | gebauer, Berlin/Madrid; Perrotin; and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

Paul Pfeiffer is an iconoclast—a breaker of icons, in the literal sense of the word. Throughout this 25-year survey of his videos and installation, he breaks down the imagery of popular culture and examines their resonant parts, isolating and amplifying the more unsettling features of entertainment media. Sports arenas evoke the collective spectacle of religious adulation, where a decontextualized Stanley Cup becomes a levitating holy relic, and lone athletes turn into saints. Pfeiffer does an increasingly rare thing among video artists by addressing form as much as content, and engages the technical craft of filmmaking. See *Self-Portrait as a Fountain* (2000), a live reconstruction of *Psycho*'s iconic shower scene using CCTV. In many instances, his looping, mirroring, or voicing over the “viral” footage from the '90s predicts the meme culture of social media. Following a season of quiet luxury in LA galleries, it is so refreshing to see the artistic process restored to its appropriate order—where the artist's curiosity blazes new trails of inquiry, and he plays back his findings in imaginatively absurd ways. In *Morning After the Deluge* (2003), Pfeiffer merges footage of the sunrise and sunset into the single disorienting haze of a moving horizon. You, like me, may find yourself muttering, “Now that's a fucking artist.”

Through June 16, at 152 North Central Avenue Los Angeles, CA 90012.

“Gillian Wearing: reflections” at Regen Projects



Gillian Wearing, *No reflection*, 2023.

Photo : Photo Mark Blower/©Gillian Wearing/ Courtesy Regen Projects

Think of painting as a language. Dedicated painters are immersed daily in its vocabulary, but artists working in other mediums—sculpture, performance, photography—typically speak the painterly equivalent of Duolingo. Gillian Wearing’s oil paintings of interiors and self-portraits have the conversational proficiency of a dedicated student—a competent formal vocabulary too limited to become poetry, or to convey the depths of her conceptual intent. Can you tell there’s a mirror at the center of *No reflection* (2023) based on the artist’s convincing rendering of a glass surface? Or, did you have to infer that from the title?

But the conceptual proposal of her masquerading as a painter is a good one. Next to a competent painting of Rembrandt’s eyes transposed onto Wearing’s face is a photograph of her wearing a silicone mask of 17th-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi. Shrouded in impenetrable darkness, it’s exquisitely cast with an Old Masters’ luminosity. Wearing’s fluency is in conceptual photography and video, where masks embody the dissonant tension between who we are and who we purport to be. In the video *Wearing Gillian* (2018), actors

recite Wearing’s words while donning deep fakes of her likeness, speaking of a desire to elicit empathy and exhume buried emotional truths. As a technological, conceptual reinvention of the self-portrait, Wearing’s use of AI feels like a comfortable progression of her work. Both describing and delivering her characteristically probing psychological force, it’s the most effective self-portrait in the show.

November 3–December 23, 2023, 6750 Santa Monica Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90038.

“Hugh Hayden: Hughman” at Lisson Gallery



Hugh Hayden, *Colonizer*, 2023.

Photo : ©Hugh Hayden/Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Enclosed in a series of individual bathroom stalls, the New York–based artist’s LA solo debut offers a series of intimate encounters—with hairy male sculptures with guns as penises, both flaccid and erect; and functioning urinals that either accommodate two users at once, or open a gloryhole to the adjacent stall. Both whimsical and absurd, and somehow wholesome despite being explicitly sexual, this is the queerest and weirdest work Hugh Hayden’s ever made.

Calling to mind the ambiguous, implicit narratives embedded into David Hammond's sculpture, as well as Robert Gober's white porcelain sinks and hairy wedges of silicon, each of Hayden's stalls reads as a single act in an incongruous play, although not every scene advances the plot. There's a waywardness to these discrete glimpses into the artist's mind (plus a few production details to be smoothed out, like the imprints of the mold blemishing otherwise perfect buttocks), but there is an earnest and captivating throughline. Hayden's quotations of queer art history forge a path to contemplations of the queer present and future, with all its medically assisted possibilities of partnership and longevity. The sculptor's foray into photography is a pair of images, provocatively titled *Colonizer*, of himself and his white male partner wearing full prosthetic pregnant bellies. And *Freedom* (2023) is a collage of Hayden's daily prescriptions: Propecia for baldness, Zyrtec for allergies, and Descovy to reduce the risk of the transmission of HIV, arranged in the shape of the American flag—an image of a newly attainable American dream.

Through January 13, at 1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles 90038.

“Barbara T. Smith: Proof” at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles



Installation view showing a large vinyl print of a photograph documenting of Barbara T. Smith's *Field Piece*.

Photo : Janelle Zara for ARTnews

For her first activation of *Field Piece* (1969–72) in 1971, Barbara T. Smith invited naked participants to get lost in an installation of 180 nine-and-a-half-foot-tall columns of hollow, colored resin, each symbolizing a blade of grass attached to a high-tech, step-activated lighting system. The scenario resonated with that particular juncture in her life, she said, in which her 17-year marriage ended just as her artistic practice was beginning: “I saw no obvious pathway ahead of me, and the idea of an infinite field of grass was beautiful to contemplate.” The installation’s slim documentation and yellowing, fragmented ephemera are indicators of a historically undervalued practice—that of a significant protagonist in what we now call performance art.

In her work, sex occasionally served liberatory functions of emotional and spiritual self-discovery (including an unexpected tryst with an art handler at the center of the *Field Piece*), defining her practice by the dual transgressions against both traditional female propriety and object-based art. Uniquely less political but more personally motivated than her fellow 1970s radical feminists, Smith's recent surge in visibility presents new points of rereading her better-known peers. Her six-decade survey at the ICA actually made me rethink the work of her former classmate Chris Burden, an artist who similarly embraced the vulnerability of his body by exposing it to actual—rather than simulated—risk. Essentially, they were both confronting their assigned positions under patriarchy, but in almost comically gendered ways. While Smith was digging deep into her inner consciousness, cultivating her own personal and sexual agency, Burden was getting shot, imprisoned, or waterboarded. Whether consciously aware of this or not, he was acting out the ways patriarchy objectifies male bodies—not as sexual objects, but as conscripted instruments of war. Contrast his blunt physicality with Smith's explicit emotional self-awareness; as she's often said, she owes much of her practice to going to therapy.

Through January 14, 1717 E. 7th St, Los Angeles, CA 90021.

